

STATE OF MICHIGAN
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HONORABLE FRASER T. STROME
PRESIDING FAMILY COURT JUDGE

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE MICHIGAN SENATE
FAMILIES, SENIORS AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

SENATE BILLS 405-408
APRIL 13, 2016

Chairman Emmons and Committee Members, I very much appreciate this opportunity to testify regarding a subject that has been a deep passion of mine for over 20 years, keeping kids in school and out of prison. In particular, I will be addressing how Baraga, Houghton, and Keweenaw Counties developed an effective truancy protocol while also emphasizing how Senate Bills 405 through 408 could help other areas in our State avoid the pitfalls and at times lengthy detours that we encountered on the road to keeping the children of the Copper Country in school.

Historically, differences between our stakeholders did not center on the importance of keeping children in school. The problems centered on who was responsible for making that happen. Early on as an Assistant Prosecutor for Houghton County, I would receive numerous petitions with attachments from our school districts shortly after the school year was completed. There was no consistency in the documentation, or as to what constituted an approved or unapproved absence. Essentially, the problems of school attendance that had manifested with students during the school year were landing on the door steps of the courthouse when school was not in session. This resulted in lots of finger pointing and ugly conversations as to who was responsible for keeping kids in school.

Early on, representatives from our ISD, Sheriff's Department, Prosecutor's Office, Juvenile Court, school officials, DHHS, and Mental Health came to the table in order to collaborate on this issue that was deeply important to all of us. Using existing statutes we were able to draft a protocol that put everyone on the same page as to interventions with students, meeting with parents, documenting absences, and getting petitions before the court. Defining who was truant, who was late, who was excused or unexcused and how to handle these problems was a long and tedious process. Initially there were serious disagreements as to how truant students should be handled from a disciplinary standpoint. Although we had decided to work together, it was not uncommon for turf wars to flare up and impede progress.

Fortunately, in the mid-1990's the Intermediate School District and Sheriff's Department were able to secure funding to employ a part-time truant officer. Truant officers were deputized and actively got children to school. When funding for the program ran out our local schools, recognizing the value of our protocol and our truant

officer, began to contribute financially in proportion to the number of students involved in the program in order to keep it running.

I am not a numbers or data person; fortunately I have staff that are. However, I am going to give you one number that highlights our success. That number is 0 – the number of children with attendance problems needing to formally appear before the Family Court Judge since 2014 because the truancy protocol failed. I'm not saying that Copper Country children do not have truancy issues. What I am saying is that we deal with those issues.

The keys to our success in dealing with truancy center on consistency in the following areas: our truancy committee members are in regular communication or meet in order to adjust and implement any changes that we see as being necessary to make our program more effective. Our truant officer is vigilant about maintaining a student watch list that is provided by the schools so that intervention can happen early when a problem arises. The truant officer is regularly in the schools and staff has been assigned to work with him directly so he is aware of any issues that may have or are about to develop. The truant officer reports to a broader group of community members on an annual basis in order to receive additional input from those involved with our kids and to identify any gaps that need addressing in our current system.

Why then, you might ask, is it necessary to pursue this legislation? From a practical standpoint, many meetings, hours of discussion and arguments may have been avoided if this legislation existed at the time that we were putting our process in place. A definition such as what "truancy" actually is, what "chronic absenteeism" is, and the appropriate ways to address these problems within the school setting would have prevented us from having to invent a wheel with a group of passionate individuals that had at times strongly divergent opinions as to what course we should take. Legislation, including the definitions that are contained within the proposed legislation, would have made our early efforts easier.

In 25 years as an Assistant Prosecutor, Prosecutor, and Judge, I have witnessed 25 high school graduation seasons in our community. Sadly, I have also too often witnessed young adults who left the Family Court and graduated to an orange Houghton County Jail jumpsuit through our District or Circuit Court process.

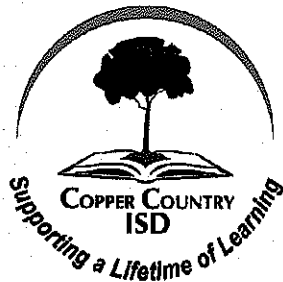
I am fully aware that the proposed legislation by itself is only a tool that can help effectuate change, change geared towards keeping our kids in school and graduating from high school, as opposed to our court system and incarceration. Clearly, we need those committed on the ground level who do not only care but are committed to doing the hard work necessary to keep kids engaged and involved at school. However, by advancing this legislation, the Legislature will be handing a tool to those of us engaged in the day to day battle of reaching these kids and helping them achieve the objectives that will not only benefit them but also the communities that they live in.

Thank you.

School Justice Forum

May 28, 2014

Marquette Holiday Inn



Copper Country Intermediate School District

Houghton/Baraga/Keweenaw County Truancy Program

Overview:

Dennis Harbour, Superintendent, CCISD

- Collaborative Effort involving CCISD, local schools, justice system, law enforcement and social services
- Truancy Intervention Model designed to keep kids in school, reduce the incidence of truancy and reduce cost associated with compulsory attendance requirements.

Partner Roles & Involvement:

- **Copper Country Intermediate School District:** Serves as fiscal agent and retains employment of Truant Officer; coordinates all activities.
- **Local School Districts:** Pledge financial support based on student caseload; commit personnel to work with Truant Officer.
- **Court System:** The Prosecuting Attorney, Assistant and Probate Court become involved as legally necessary and are proactive in helping resolve issues before they enter the hearing phase.
- **Sheriff Department.:** Offers assistance with locating parents' addresses that may otherwise be unavailable when home visits are necessary; will provide uniform presence if necessary. Also, deputize truant officer.
- **Department of Human Services:** Offers assistance when there is a family on the "cash assistance program," or when a report of finding is necessary.

Truant Office Intervention: William Green, Truant Officer

- Student Watch List
- Direct Contact with Parents
- Initiate Letters from School
- Filing of Non-Compliance Order
- Filing Complaint with Court
- Letter From Prosecutor
- Attendance Contract
- Initiate Involvement of DHS

Role of Prosecutor:
Brittany Bulleit, Houghton County
Assistant Prosecuting Attorney

- Attend meetings involving parents, students and Truant Officer
- Functions as a primary advocate for school and Truant Officer

Role of Probate Court:
Fraser Strome, Houghton County Probate Judge

- Upon receipt of petition the juvenile probation officer schedules an informal meeting "Truancy Accountability Hearing" with minor child, parents/guardian, truant officer, prosecutor and at least one official from the minor child's school.
- Goals are agreed upon and put into written form and signed off on by all parties including the minor child.
- Progress towards achieving goals is monitored by school officials, the truant officer and the juvenile probation officer.
- If truancy is not resolved, the matter is scheduled for a formal court hearing before the judge. (rare because process has been effective)